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ABSTRACT

Over the last 3 decades, educators have found an overwhelming relationship between parent education levels, parental involvement, and children's school success. Family literacy affects parents' effectiveness in helping their children learn. These are the four components of comprehensive family literacy: (1) interactive literacy activities between parents and children; (2) parent training on how to be their child's first and most important teacher and how to participate in their child's education; (3) literacy training for parents that leads to economic self-sufficiency; and (4) age-appropriate education for children to prepare them for success in school and life. Configuration of those components varies, with most programs providing center-based classes for children and parents and some providing home visits. In addition to literacy improvement, in some programs parents can learn workplace skills through volunteer activities at their child's school. The appeal of family literacy programs as a strategy for educational reform is based on its flexibility (can be adapted to meet the needs of diverse families); its comprehensiveness (two generations educated simultaneously); and its social impact (cycle of poverty and low literacy are broken). To support family literacy in statewide programs of education, governors could encourage state agencies to collaborate on family literacy services; make family literacy an allowable use of existing education funds; and authorize specific funds for family literacy. (There are 2 appendices and

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Family Literacy: A Strategy for Educational Improvement*

Summary

Over the past three decades, the nation has actively pursued reforms to improve the academic achievement of America's children. The majority of these efforts have focused on instruction and intervention practices, but have seldom addressed the overwhelming relationship between parental education levels, parental involvement, and children's school success.

Family literacy directly affects the role and effectiveness of parents in helping their children learn. If parents understand the language and literacy lessons their children learn in school, they can more easily provide the experiences necessary for their children to succeed . Bringing parents and children together to learn in an educational setting is the core of family literacy and the way to provide parents with firsthand experiences about what their children learn and how they are taught.

The four components of comprehensive family literacy include:

- Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children.
- Parent training on how to be their child's first and most important teacher and how to participate as a full partner in their child's education.
- Literacy training for parents that leads to economic self-sufficiency.
- Age-appropriate education for children to prepare them for success in school and life.

These components—children's education, adult education, parenting education, and interactive literacy activities between parents and children—may be configured in different ways. Most family literacy programs offer center-based classes for children and parents; some provide services primarily through home visits, and many offer a combination of regularly scheduled center-based classes and periodic home visits. Wherever the location, a comprehensive program may include parents learning workplace skills as they volunteer in their child's school, the child receiving reading instruction, and parents learning alongside their child at designated times.

Governors who make education a top priority take into account the needs of the entire family. Incorporating family literacy into educational programs for children and adults results in a flexible and comprehensive strategy that can improve educational outcomes. To support family literacy, Governors can:

- encourage state agencies to collaborate as they plan family literacy services.
- make family literacy an allowable use of existing education funds.
- authorize specific funds for family literacy.

Background

What is Family Literacy?

Family literacy is a unique approach to education that works by bringing together parents and children to learn and receive their education. Parents improve their basic skills in the adult education classroom, have a time to come together to talk about their own educational needs as well as the

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needs of their children, and work with their children during Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time, creating a very holistic approach to serving the educational needs of the family.

The federal definition of family literacy services includes four integrated components:

- *Interactive literacy activities between parents and children.* In family literacy programs, parents have a time during the school day to participate in PACT Time in their children's classroom. Parents sit side by side with their child, experiencing the lesson their child is studying, looking at their child's curriculum, noting teaching strategies and positive teaching behaviors that support literacy development that they can transition to home activities as they work with their child. They also have an opportunity to connect with the classroom teacher, ask questions, and share educational concerns. PACT Time offers parents the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the educational expectations for their children and how as parents they can be supportive to their child in meeting those expectations.

- *Parent training on how to be their children's first and most important teacher and how to participate as a full partner in their children's education.* Designated Parent Time during family literacy services gives parents in the program an opportunity to support one another, receive support from the adult education teacher who facilitates Parent Time, and ask critical questions about their own educational needs, as well as their children's educational needs. It also allows parents to understand what happens in their children's classrooms during the school day.

- *Literacy training for parents that leads to economic self-sufficiency.* Adults improve their basic skills, which include language acquisition, literacy development, and life skills and job skills necessary for employment. The curriculum is designed to reflect the real-life experiences of the participants and to build on individual students' strengths. Situating this component in an elementary school sends a strong message to parents that their skill development is important for themselves and for their children. In turn, children see that their parents value education, enhancing the value children place on education.

- *An age-appropriate education for children to prepare them for success in school and life.* In family literacy programs, children take part in their own classroom learning activities. This component provides a quality education for elementary school-age children in their classroom, emphasizing improved academic achievement. The children's education component particularly identifies the elementary school as a valuable setting for family literacy programs.

The vital ingredients that define an effective comprehensive family literacy program are integrated family-focused services for both generations with sufficient intensity and duration of instruction to effect significant changes. Programs should target parents and children most in need of improving their literacy skills, which often means families living at the lowest economic levels. These families may live in urban or rural communities; they often represent a variety of cultures; many receive public aid or have done so in the recent past. All have significant educational and noneducational barriers that stand in the way of obtaining meaningful employment, academic success, and economic stability.

Family Literacy in Federal Legislation

Over the past four years, Congress has increasingly recognized the power of family literacy by including it in various child services and education legislation. Most significant is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which includes family literacy in the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program; Title I, Part A; Reading First; Early Reading First; 21st Century Community Learning Centers; American Indian, Hawaiian, and Alaskan Native education programs; and others. Family literacy also is provided for in the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), which is Title II of the Workforce Investment Act; the Head Start Act; the Temporary Assistance for Needy

Families (TANF) block grant in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA); and the Community Services Block Grant Act.

With the exception of Even Start, which has a Fiscal Year 2002 appropriation of $250 million, there are no specific or mandatory set-asides for family literacy. As a result of the federal government's emphasis on family literacy, states are building on these federal laws and creating their own initiatives.[1]

Combining various funding sources at the program level is challenging, especially in those states without dedicated family literacy funding. However, many family literacy programs successfully use different funding sources for the four components of the federal model. For example, a program may use adult education funds subgranted through the state from the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act for the adult education component, while using Even Start to provide the child education, parent training, and interactive literacy activities components. Programs may further supplement these funding sources with additional public and private grants.

The Importance of Family Literacy

Family literacy is a proven strategy for involving parents in their children's education in a comprehensive way and can help to reach the most underserved families. The importance of parental involvement is highlighted by the fact that:

- Sixty percent of principals operating schoolwide Title I programs report that inadequacy of parent involvement is a barrier to the application of high standards to all students, compared to 27 percent of principals in non-Title I schools.[2]
- Sixty-four percent of public elementary schools with a high concentration of poverty perceive lack of parent education as a barrier to parent involvement, compared to 12 percent of low-poverty schools.[3]

One of the best indicators of a child's academic success is the educational attainment of the mother.

- Seventy-three percent of children whose mothers are college graduates are read aloud to every day, while only 42 percent of children whose mothers have not completed high school are read aloud to every day.[4]
- Kindergartners whose mothers have more education are more likely to score in the highest quartile in reading, mathematics, and general knowledge than all other children.[5]
- The National Reading Panel held five regional hearings to help panel members gain a clearer understanding of issues important to the public. One key item identified as a result of these hearings was "the importance of the role of parents and other concerned individuals, especially in providing children with early language and literacy experiences that foster reading development."[6]

Increasingly, policymakers and school leaders are looking to parent involvement as a strategy to improve children's achievement. U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige continues to build on the No Child Left Behind Act, 2001, with "four common-sense pillars of reform." One of these pillars is expanded parental choice.

> No one cares more about a child's education than a parent. That is why there is no more powerful force for change than parents who are armed with information and options. If we want to improve schools, we must give parents information through testing and options to use that information by expanding parental choice...parents can meet the needs of their children and improve their local schools and school districts.[7]

A key element in family literacy is that it brings together parents and their children in an educational environment to facilitate and nurture the learning relationship between them.

- Family literacy works to improve the educational performance of children by fostering a learning partnership between schools, teachers, and parents.
- As parents increase their academic skills, they are better able to support their children's education while also increasing their likelihood of gainful employment.
- As the parent's level of comfort with the school increases, the parent becomes a stronger advocate for the school within the community.

Family literacy offers a flexible and comprehensive educational approach, making it an ideal umbrella for collaboration among agencies at the state and local levels to draw on the experience of individuals in child and adult education, health, and labor.

Examples of Family Literacy Initiatives

To help break the cycle of low educational attainment and poverty, Governors are incorporating family literacy into their education agendas. The four states' examples below are cited frequently for their success, in part due to the active role each Governor played in establishing the initiatives. The fifth example is a national model developed by the National Center for Family Literacy.

Illinois

Literacy has been a high priority issue for Governor George Ryan of Illinois since he took office in 1998. In Illinois, literacy means family literacy, adult education, children's literacy, English as a second language, and workplace literacy. The appointment of a senior advisor on literacy illustrates the sharp focus Governor Ryan has placed on these issues. The senior advisor on literacy provides leadership from the Governor's Office. The Governor has also appointed an advisory council on literacy made up of 20 members with a variety of backgrounds in child and family issues.

This year, Governor Ryan increased spending on adult education and literacy by 32 percent in the fiscal year 2002 budget. In addition, he signed legislation in July 2001 that transferred administration of adult education and literacy from the State Board of Education to the Illinois Community College Board and created the Illinois Community College Board Adult Education and Literacy Fund.

Because of Governor Ryan's leadership, the Illinois Community College Board has made adult education and family literacy one of six priorities. The Board has allocated $70 million for adult education and literacy programs in Illinois. Family literacy is an allowable use of these dollars. To streamline the grant-making process, the individual community-based organizations responsible for delivering most literacy services may apply for funding directly without going through a local education agency (LEA).

Using funds awarded through an Even Start Statewide Family Literacy Initiative Grant, the Governor's Office joined with other state agencies to form the Illinois Family Literacy Consortium. The consortium coordinates the various federal and state funding streams for family literacy, including the $70 million for adult education and literacy administered by the Illinois Community College Board. An additional $3 million in state funds is available specifically for family literacy from the Secretary of State's Literacy Office and the Illinois Department of Education. With the Governor's leadership, the state agencies responsible for funding family literacy have adopted a comprehensive, common definition for family literacy based on the federal definition and have developed a set of common performance indicators for family literacy programs.

Currently the Governor's Office is assessing how family literacy programs form partnerships to obtain funding and is working to develop a professional development program that takes into account the various delivery systems for family literacy in the state.

Kentucky

Where does family literacy fit when a state aggressively addresses every area of education from early childhood through higher education? That was the issue facing the Kentucky Institute for Family Literacy, an organization created in 2000 to coordinate the state's funding and services for family literacy.

In addition to launching a major reform of Kentucky's higher education system in 1997, Governor Paul E. Patton created KIDS NOW, the Governor's Early Childhood Initiative, and charged the Council on Postsecondary Education and the Department for Adult Education with reducing the number of Kentuckians at the two lowest levels of literacy.

Tying together all these initiatives is Governor Patton's overarching vision for Kentucky to surpass the national average on a number of quality of life indicators by 2020. Within this context, the Kentucky Institute for Family Literacy is working to create a system of family literacy that will support all the state's educational goals.

Affiliated with the National Center for Family Literacy, the Institute is overseen by an advisory board of all the state agencies with a stake in family literacy. Governor Patton challenged these agencies to make family literacy services available in all 120 Kentucky counties. The Institute partners worked collaboratively to develop a funding formula for each county based on the number of adults at the two lowest literacy levels. The Department for Adult Education and Literacy and the Council on Postsecondary Education came forward with an additional $4 million for family literacy programs, doubling the available funding. As a result, the number of state-funded programs grew from 48 in 2000 to 84 in 2001. As of July 2002, family literacy is now funded in all 120 counties.

As Governor Patton methodically and energetically targets each educational obstacle to a better quality of life for Kentucky citizens, family literacy programs will help the most disadvantaged families share in the commonwealth's success.

Pennsylvania

In June of 2001, before being tapped by President George W. Bush to serve as Director of Homeland Security, Governor Tom Ridge signed legislation establishing permanent funding for Pennsylvania's family literacy programs. The law funds a grant program specifically for family literacy and further channels at least 25 percent of the commonwealth's federal adult education state grant to family literacy specifically. Governor Ridge increased funding to adult education and family literacy by 157 percent, or an additional $12 million. His commitment to family literacy helped establish programs in each of the commonwealth's 67 counties.

In 1998, Governor Ridge turned an amendment to an adult education bill into a statewide family literacy initiative by earmarking $3 million of the state budget specifically for family literacy. Further, he directed the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education to initiate family literacy programs through local educational agencies and nonprofit organizations by combining these funds with the commonwealth's federal Even Start grant. Today, this arrangement of combining federal and state dollars provides nearly $18 million for family literacy in Pennsylvania. Building on this foundation, Governor Ridge next redirected Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant funds toward family literacy programs, using family literacy as a welfare-to-work strategy.

Under Governor Ridge's leadership, Pennsylvania's family literacy programs produced these results:

- Parents demonstrated significant gains in reading, mathematics, language usage, and spelling on standardized tests.
- Parents learned to support their child's literacy development and actively did so.

- Children made significant developmental gains in a range of skill areas including literacy, numeracy, language and cognitive skills, gross and fine motor skills, and social behavior.
- In school, 80 percent of the children displayed gains in reading, writing, and mathematics.[8]

Working in collaboration with other support services, of those families participating in family literacy:

- One-third began receiving new employment and training services.
- Nearly 20 percent began receiving professional counseling services.
- One-quarter of the children began receiving early intervention, Title I, special education, or English as a Second Language (ESL) services.[9]

Washington

Families That Work grew out of Project Even Start, a state program similar to and predating the federal Even Start Program. The Washington state program began in 1998 with funds from reduced welfare caseload funds obtained by the Office of Adult Literacy, a division of the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. Families that Work focuses on basic skills taught in the context of work and family. Goals include attainment of economic self-sufficiency, family management, and parenting skills leading to family stability and success for every member of the family. For this reason, Families that Work incorporates the Equipped for the Future (EFF) framework, an effort by the National Institute for Literacy to address the needs of adult learners in their primary roles of worker, citizen, and parent/family member.

Participants spend at least 20 hours per week in the program, which primarily targets Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients. It also serves working poor families with incomes up to 175 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. Families that Work incorporates the four components of the federal definition of a family literacy program, with the addition of work-readiness development. The program includes adult basic education for work and family; family management and parenting skills; age-appropriate education for all children while the parent is participating in program activities and work; and parent-child interaction skills promoting the child's literacy development. These components are provided in an integrated format. Currently 28 programs provide services at 43 sites. Program coordinators partner with Head Start and other state agencies.

Families in Schools

The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) developed an approach to family literacy called Families in Schools that involves children ages five to ten and their parents. Families in Schools targets children and their parents who are most in need of educational and other services. Data analyzed from the third year of this initiative indicate that the average educational attainment of the parents enrolled is ninth grade, with 74.7 percent living in poverty and another 12.9 percent living in near poverty. These families living at or below the poverty line had an average of three children per family.

An aspect of the Families in Schools approach that has become very evident is that all parents want their children to succeed. Of the adults enrolled during the 2000-2001 school year, their primary goals were to improve their English skills, become a better parent, earn their GEDs, and help their children succeed in school in the future.

Teachers at various Families in Schools sites report that children whose parents are a part of this approach display improved behavior, attend school more regularly, and complete homework assignments more regularly. Parents in the program are more involved in their children's education. Principals of the schools implementing this approach report more overall parent involvement in the schools. According to Principal Tony Covarrubia, "Families in Schools has worked because it has built a better relationship between the community and the parents, and also between the teacher and those parents who are involved."[10]

What Governors Can Do for Family Literacy

Many children, particularly those children from poor families where lack of education is one of the most consistent barriers, start school at a disadvantage and do not attain the level of proficiency expected of them as they progress through their academic careers. While many Governors make education a top priority, they must also take into account the needs of the entire family when formulating their education strategies.

Encourage agencies to work together for families

Without collaboration, federal, state, and private funding streams lead both to duplication of services and to gaps in services. Governors can strengthen services to families by endorsing collaboration among state agencies and encouraging the combination of efforts and funding in order to strengthen opportunities for all students, including adult students who are parents. In addition, governors can encourage agencies involved in adult and child education to adopt unified Request for Proposals (RFPs) and common quality indicators for accountability purposes.

Make family literacy an allowable use of existing education funds

Most state laws do not specifically address the use of family literacy. Even fewer mention the use of family literacy in elementary schools, although family literacy services may be an allowable use of funds. Governors can encourage the use of family literacy and make family literacy an allowable use of funds for child education, adult education, English as a second language, vocational and workforce development, and parental involvement. Monies included as an allowable use should provide not only programming funds, but funds for professional development and technical assistance to help programs continuously improve and serve their families better.

Authorize specific funds for family literacy

Federal funds may be tapped for family literacy (e.g., from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant, and the Workforce Investment Act). Six states redirect federal funds to family literacy. This type of funding ranges from $500,000 to $5.3 million and totals $16 million. Governors and lawmakers may be able to combine federal funding with modest amounts of state funding to create meaningful programs. Currently 11 states provide state funding specifically for family literacy, ranging from $315,000 to $9.6 million and together totaling $32 million nationwide.

Conclusion

One reason states repeatedly turn to family literacy as a strategy for educational reform is its flexibility. The strengths-based approach of family literacy encourages programs to adapt to meet the immediate and long-term needs of the families served, encompassing preschool and elementary school children, teen parents, low-literacy parents, low-wage working parents, English language learners, and extended family, in both rural and urban settings. Another reason for family literacy's appeal is its comprehensiveness. By educating two generations at once, communities can accomplish change in their educational and economic futures. Perhaps most significant, by influencing today's children, family literacy helps tomorrow's parents break the cycle of low literacy and poverty for generations to come.

**This Issue Brief was prepared by Brenda Logan, director of school reform initiatives for the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL); Tony Peyton, director of policy and public affairs for NCFL; Cindy Read, director for the Kentucky Institute for Family Literacy (KIFL); Jennifer McMaster, senior multimedia specialist for NCFL; and Rod Botkins, policy specialist for NCFL.*

The National Center for Family Literacy, based in Louisville, Kentucky, is a nonprofit organization that provides advocacy, research, and training for thousands of family literacy programs throughout the United States. For more information on family literacy in schools, contact Brenda Logan at the

National Center for Family Literacy, 325 West Main Street, Suite 300, Louisville, Kentucky 40202; or call NCFL at 502-584-1133. For more information about state family literacy initiatives, contact Rod Botkins at NCFL, or visit the Family Literacy Policy Project on-line at www.famlit.org/flpp.

Appendix A

Research Supports Positive Outcomes for Families

Research has long supported the positive educational outcomes brought about by parent involvement in general and the family literacy approach specifically. Both children and adults enrolled in family literacy programs make gains in reading and in other literacy skills. For parents and families, this increase in skills can lead to economic stability.

Child Outcomes: Family Literacy Students Do Well in School
Students who participate in family literacy as preschoolers score significantly higher on standardized tests of reading and mathematics in early elementary grades.[11]

Elementary students in Families in Schools programs show significant positive differences from comparable students whose parents are not involved in family literacy, according to a survey completed by elementary teachers of 257 Families in Schools students and 262 randomly selected, non-Families in Schools elementary students. Families in Schools students:

- Have better school attendance
- Have better behavior
- Have parents who are more involved in their education[12]

Parent Outcomes: Family Literacy Parents Show Significant Gains
Parents participating in Even Start Family Literacy programs achieved significant gains on the reading and math Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) reading and math tests. These gains are comparable to or greater than those observed in other studies of adult education programs.[13]

Family Outcomes: Parent's Educational Support Is a Direct Link to Student Success
The link between a parent's educational support and a child's success in school is well documented. According to *The Nation's Report Card: Fourth-Grade Reading*, students who reported discussing their studies at home daily, weekly, or monthly with a parent had higher average scores than students who reported never or hardly ever having such discussions.[14] Family literacy facilitates this sort of supportive interaction between parents and children.

Research conducted by the National Center for Family Literacy shows significant gains in the frequency with which parents who participate in family literacy programs talk to their school-aged children's teachers, volunteer at their children's school, talk to their children about their day, read or look at books with their children, take their children to the library, help their children with homework, and attend school activities.[15]

Appendix B

The Families in Schools model was developed through a partnership between the National Center for Family Literacy, Toyota Motor Corporation, and 15 public school districts across the country. Within three and one-half years, this pilot approach has grown to include some 45 elementary schools, almost all of which are operating schoolwide Title I programs. In most, a large majority of the student population (80 to 90 percent) is eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. An important element of the Families in Schools approach is an emphasis on collaboration at the local level, while also incorporating federal funding, to ensure program stability beyond the initial grant cycle.

The school districts implementing the Families in Schools model are:

Aurora Public Schools (Aurora, CO)
Broward County Public Schools (Ft. Lauderdale, FL)
Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation (Evansville, IN)
Fremont Unified School District (Fremont, CA)
Houston Independent School District (Houston, TX)
Jefferson County Public Schools (Louisville, KY)
Kanawha County Schools (Charleston, WV)
Los Angeles Unified School District (Los Angeles, CA)
Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (Nashville, TN)
New Orleans Public Schools (New Orleans, LA)
Richmond City Public Schools (Richmond, VA)
Rochester City School District (Rochester, NY)
Seattle Public Schools (Seattle, WA)
St. Louis Public Schools (St. Louis, MO)
Sunnyside Unified School District (Tucson, AZ)

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[1] Arizona, California, Delaware, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina provide funding for family literacy specifically. Arkansas, California, Illinois, Missouri, New York, and Washington redirect federal funds for family literacy specifically. For more information on state family literacy initiatives, visit the Family Literacy Policy Project online at http://www.famlit.org/flpp.

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